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Civilization, Barbarism, and Othering: Or How The Magistrate Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Barbarians

In J.M. Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, readers are introduced to the mild-mannered Magistrate, a soft man of principle and justice, who stands for what he thinks of as an old way of "gentlemanly behavior" (108). Unusual in his position in postcolonial fiction as a sympathetic protagonist from the colonizer's culture, the Magistrate is still not without the faults that make him richly human. Despite his sympathies for the barbarians, he does not view them as civilized or as those he can relate to. Throughout the novel, however, his propensity for seeing the barbarians as the Other begins to fall away as he truly begins to see the force of the Empire he has served for so long and willingly, whose prejudices regarding civilization and barbarism he once held. His own torture at the will of the Empire and his process of transformation from man to beast facilitates his deepening understanding and a new sense of freedom, resulting not in the typical "sense of despair" that is often read into the end of Coetzee's novel, but rather "uncharted territory, an ethical space which opens up the possibility of a non-appropriative encounter with the other" (Craps 65).

The differences between civilization and barbarism in the novel are represented by parameters set out by the Empire, as it is the Empire who has the power to do so, and allows the barbarians to be seen as Others. The Empire appears to see these differences as marked by what each group is or is not; barbarians are purported to be illiterate, lazy, cruel, and secretive. If these things are negatives, then the Empire is well-read, industrious, benevolent, and open. Because the Empire is the hegemonic force at the time, they are allowed to impose their own value systems on people who may or may not share them (it seems unlikely that they would be wholly shared, regardless). The barbarians are then seen as

the Other, created by the process the Empire uses "to assert their own power, will, and value" (Mushtaq 25).

By asserting the barbarians as Other because of their supposed differences, the Empire guarantees that their own interests are protected. After all, who wants to stand up for the Other, those who are so different? Once the barbarians are Othered, it becomes permissible to use "unjust violence" because "the Empire is indifferent to the sufferings of the barbarians" (Mushtaq 28) . Joll seems to see them as no more than animals, perhaps even less than. His lack of sympathy is seen by his commentary on hunting "when thousands of deer, pigs, bears were slaim, so many that a mountain of carcasses has to be left to rot ('Which was a pity')" (Coetzee 1). Joll expresses some regret about leaving carcasses of slain animals, yet it seems doubtful he would do the same for slain barbarians, which are to be celebrated, as evidenced by the "patriotic bloodlust" when captives are brought back to town and beaten in the square (104). By then, the process of Othering is complete. Not only do the townspeople condone torture, but they carry it out as well. Paradoxically, in their pursuit of barbarism and in defense of civilization, the Empire becomes barbaric.

The main difference, the thing which permits the Empire to feel so superior and allows it to other the barbarians, is the difference between civilization and barbarism which is in the words of Michael Valdez Moses, a "fundamental distinction. . . Between the lettered and the unlettered" (117). This is both true and false. The barbarians, it seems, do not have a method for writing their language and the Empire does. For the Empire, this distinction is important because it allows them to dismiss the barbarians as illiterate, separating them in one of many ways. Since they cannot read or write, they have no use for the things that the Empire holds as important to civilization, the law and history. Even the Magistrate, the closest that the barbarians have to an advocate, believes "after which [the success of the barbarian invasion] the barbarians will wipe their backsides on the town archives" (143). The belief that the barbarians hold little to no respect for the laws and history of the Empire is unfounded, but based on the idea that they cannot read or write, so their ignorance must translate into disregard for the law and history of the Empire. That literacy is the primary difference between civilization and barbarism is a false pretense, set-up by the Empire in

order to perpetuate a major difference between the barbarians and themselves, allowing them a feeling of superiority. The illiteracy of the barbarians prevents them from participating in the civilized life that the Empire views as superior.

The presumption that the barbarians do not understand and cannot participate in civilized life because of their illiteracy is faulty because the Empire misunderstands and others the barbarians. The first is the issue of the wooden slips, engraved with some former language or meaning that the Magistrate cannot figure out. As Moses says later in his essay, "the gulf that separates the literate Empire from the illiterate barbarians is not so vast nor as absolute as the magistrate sometimes imagines" (117). The barbarians, it seems, had held the secret to literacy at some point, yet they lost it. The slips symbolize the rise and fall using this narrow view of civilization; those which once had literacy do not any longer and are now barbaric. Written language can and does become indecipherable. At some point, those who speak and write a language die off and leave it unknowable. Maria Boleti discusses the origins of the term barbarian, which has to do with "the perception of other languages as meaningless sounds" (81). This can be taken further in that other written language is often perceived as meaningless. The Empire or Self cannot comprehend the language of the Other and dismisses it as barbaric, when it is not necessarily so. By doing so, they deny the possibility of their own downfall and that they too may eventually be considered uncivilized, unable to participate in the life they have perpetuated as superior.

That the barbarians are cruel is another example of their being the stereotyped other, and is ironic as it is the Empire inflicting cruelty on the barbarians; the Empire's cruelty and uncivilized behavior is hallmarked by its desire "to inscribe itself on the bodies of its subjects" (Boleti 79). Ironically, the very thing which the Empire views as making it superior is that which ultimately makes it barbaric; Coetzee has the Empire use "writing (inscription and interpretation) as a form of torture" (Moses 120). The prominent example of this is when the barbarian captives are brought to town and Colonel Joll "rubs a handful of dust into his [the prisoner's] naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal. I read the word upside down: ENEMY. . . Then the beating begins. . . . The game, I see, is to beat them till their backs are washed clean" (Coetzee 105). Joll uses written language to define his

enemies clearly, regardless of whether or not they are actually his enemies. The barbarians likely do not even understand the frontier patois, let along the significance of being labeled an "enemy." The Empire's literacy and supposed culture do not mean their dismissal of barbarian suffering, intentional cruelty, and the pleasure they seem to take from torturing the barbarians make them any more civilized than the barbarians, simply because barbarians do not have a written language.

The Empire's attitudes towards the barbarians as dismissive of their humanity is not unique: the Magistrate is no less guilty of this behavior than anyone else of the Empire as he says on page fifty-two, "Do I really look forward to the triumph of the barbarian way: intellectual torpor, slovenliness, tolerance of disease and death?" His attitude is enlightened in comparison to those of his fellow countrymen, but is still steeped in othering and stereotyping. What does he really know of barbarian traits? When he is speaking to the barbarian girl and notes her "fondness for facts. . . pragmatic dicta," he considers why she might have the preference and says, "perhaps that is how barbarian children are brought up" (Coetzee 40). "Perhaps" the magistrate says, indicating an air of doubt and skepticism. He knows more than his countrymen about the barbarians, but it is not enough to make evaluations of their culture and lives; he even admits so as he says, "But what do I know of barbarian upbringings?" (56) Even when he is confronted with a barbarian girl that essentially lives with him, he cannot see her as she truly is. He begins to forget her not long after their departure from one another and does not remember seeing her the first time. His distance allows him to other the barbarians as much as the Empire, despite his sympathy and advocacy of them.

The Empire's use of writing as a form of torture leads to the scars that mark the body of the barbarian girl as disabled feet, partial blindness, and a "caterpillar" like scar on her brow (31). It is through these scars that the Magistrate tortures the barbarian girl, using her scars as a means to try and decipher her, to understand her Otherness as he uses "interpretation as a form of torture" (Moses 120). Although the Magistrate is seeking to understand the other in his interactions with the girl, he also tortures her as he does so, trying to convince her to discuss her torture and that of her father, who dies from his

torture. The Magistrate knows "an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive" (7). He does her no favors as he tries to understand her and forces her to relive her torture, but "it has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31). His own understanding is more important to him in the beginning than her needs, but the narrator does let her tell him at her own pace, does not force her to talk to him, and "in doing so, he shows his willingness to *live with difference*, without fully understanding the other" (Boleti 80). Although he is a torturer in his own way, the Magistrate is willing to live with the difference, as opposed to the Empire, which sees the difference as other, hence inferior.

The sympathy that the Magistrate feels for the barbarians puts him under suspicion and scrutiny of the Empire, which leads to his transformation from man to beast, from respected to othered, and results from the very Empire he had once sworn to serve. According to Hania Nashef, the process is a result of a "fall from power or a change in status paves the way to the process of 'becoming-animal'" (21). After he returns the barbarian girl, the Magistrate loses his position and is imprisoned. This is the beginning of his transformation from beast to animal, as he is at the whims of those who imprisoned him for everything, including food, washing, sunshine, and human contact. The accusation of treason "impels a becoming. . . [the Magistrate is] treated like the native other" (Nashef 25). Eventually, the Magistrate acknowledges that being subject to degradation makes him "daily become more like a beast," more concerned with his physical and social needs than higher ideals of justice for the barbarians (84). He describes himself in unflattering terms by saying, "truly, man was not made to live alone! I build my day unreasonably around the hours when I am fed. I guzzle my food like a dog. A bestial life is turning me into a beast" (80). Because of his treatment, he has become animalistic and is regarded on the same level as the barbarians whom Joll (and the rest of the Empire) hold with no respect. Although the Magistrate wants to understand the other and to decipher the barbarian girl, he is not able to until he becomes the same status as they are, that of the beast. His sympathies result in his differences from the self of the Empire and consequent status of Other, dehumanized as much as any barbarian, yet, ironically, this dehumanization makes him far more humane than

the professedly "civilized" Empire. Before his transformation, the Magistrate says things such as, "of the screaming which afterword people claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing. . . The noise that all these souls [of the town] make on a warm summer evening does not cease because somewhere someone is crying" (5). He chooses not to hear the screams and torture; he chooses his cosseted and easy life rather than the inevitably hard path he ends up traversing. After his othering and transformation, the Magistrate is able to acknowledge "somewhere, always, a child is being beaten" (80). His superficial sympathy is now empathy and kinship as he sits in his prison room "trying to attune my hearing to that infinitely faint level at which the cries of all who suffered here must still beat from wall-to-wall" (80). His "becoming-animal" allows him a new, deeper sense of humanity that opens his consciousness "to the existence and suffering of others," those that he previously ignored (Nashef 30).

In the article discussing the becoming-animal of the Magistrate, the author says "a becoming can function as a source of creativity, a possibility for a new beginning. . . Although becoming. . . serves as a source of creativity, it also has negative connotations" (Nashef 22). The author explains the Magistrate's becoming and focuses far more on the negative experiences of the Magistrate, never fully realizing his "new beginning" (22). The Magistrate gains a true empathy and also gains new freedoms which had previously been denied to him as a member of the colonizer. After the conversation when he realizes that he will lose his post, he states:

> I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken. I am a free man. . . But what a dangerous joy! It should not be so easy to attain salvation. . . In my opposition there is nothing heroic. (Coetzee 78)

The Magistrate is aware that breaking with the Empire is dangerous and he pays the price through his imprisonment and his transformation into a beast, but his emotion after this is one of the first genuine instances of any emotion. Whereas before he was going through the motions as a typical bureaucrat, he has finally made a choice that he can live with. His observation that "it should not be so easy to attain salvation" is astute and correct

(78). He must first suffer as the Other, as the beast, before he can achieve a new level of understanding.

What the Magistrate gains, however, is more than he loses; for the first time, he has made a choice. Primarily, he has gained the freedom to choose his path and the course of his own life, allowing him freedoms in his new beginning. In his old life, he was constrained by the expectations of the Empire and the town, but by becoming Other, he has already violated the norms and made himself an exile. As an exile, he scavenges and begs, but he is permitted to follow his conscience however he wishes. He chooses to return to the prison room, not because he particularly wants to (although there are physical considerations), but because he is concerned for the soldier whose duty it is to watch him. He says to the soldier "Think about why I came back and what it would have meant if I had not. You can't expect sympathy from the men in blue" (101). Had he not returned, the soldier would have suffered, perhaps been tortured, but the Magistrate returns to prevent yet more suffering. For the first time in his life, the Magistrate is allowed to follow his own scruples, not the edicts of the Empire, and despite his sufferings, he seems to find that it agrees with him.

With the Magistrate now a free man in body and in spirit, the ending of the novel holds particular importance as his dreams seem to turn into reality. His dreams are often full of snow with the barbarian girl making a castle in the courtyard. She is barely recognizable, covered up in a parka. It is not until the Magistrate stands up against the cruelty in the square as soldiers and townspeople beat the captives, when he shouts "No!" to the power of the Empire, that he can share an intimate moment with the girl in a dream (106). She feeds him bread, signifying as Stef Craps says "a sign of communion" (66). Once the Magistrate chooses to stand up and make use of his new freedom, he is permitted the company of the Other as an equal, as someone who has suffered as well. Because he has resumed what authority is left in the town, the Magistrate is in the most promising position to connect his town and the barbarians and his suffering allows him to understand them in a way that the other colonizers cannot, allowing for the possibility of a "coming community" (qtd. in Craps 66). The scene with the children and the snowmen is not what the Magistrate had expected, but as he says "it is not a bad snowman" (Coetzee 156). In another sense, the Magistrate may

be missing seemingly essential parts of himself, like the snowman has no arms, but ultimately, they are not all bad. The Magistrate is pressing "on along a road that may lead nowhere" and he is certainly correct (Coetzee 156). Community with the barbarians is not a given, it is something for the distant future, but he feels as though he has lost his way because no one else has ventured "forward into uncharted territory" (Craps 66).

The line between civilization and barbarism in Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, seems to be primarily illustrated by those who are literate and those who are not, yet this is thrown into question as literacy is used as an excuse to other the barbarians, imposing the Empire's own values onto another culture. As literacy, in a sense, is used in order to torture and degrade, the line between civilization and barbarism grows even more uncertain, forcing the Magistrate into his actions. His actions on the behalf of the othered barbarians result in his imprisonment and subsequent transformation into a beast, but, while degrading, his transformation leads him both to new freedoms and a higher understanding of the other as he communes with them. Since the Magistrate has now experienced the Other, the seemingly despairing ending of the book as he admits to ignorance is not necessarily all that despairing. His uncertainty and ignorance can be seen as products of his new understanding and the potential for community between barbarians and the supposedly civilized, linking them together in a previously unexplored way.

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